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ABSTRACT

The Yakima Indians of central Washington, speakers of Sahaptin, believe that children should be treated with great respect. For the most part, the Yakimas express strongly negative attitudes about using any form of baby talk while speaking to children. Through interviews conducted with native speakers of Sahaptin, a list of words and expressions used only with children was gathered, although the informants denied that there is baby talk in Sahaptin. The eight baby talk items elicited in the interviews are described here. (PMP)

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A NOTE ON SAHAPTIN BABY TALK

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In our culture it is not unusual to find individuals who deny ever using any form of baby talk to children, in spite of the fact that it is difficult, if not impossible, to find an adult who does address a baby in precisely the same way he addresses an adult. The very least an adult usually does is to raise the pitch of his voice somewhat in addressing a baby. This has been considered to be one of the components of the baby-talk register (Weeks, 1971), but is probably not recognized as such by its users. The individual who has never used baby-talk terms may be almost as rare.

This negative attitude toward baby talk is even more intense among speakers of Sahaptin, the Yakima Indians of central Washington. Among their many beliefs about child-rearing practices is that children should be treated with adult-like respect. When I first asked an old man, who was working as my informant, about baby talk in Sahaptin, he vehemently denied that there was such a thing. The term 'baby talk' seems to have a pejorative ring to it. (It may be time for a euphemism to be introduced.) However, after seeing baby-talk items in six languages (Ferguson, 1964) and noting that it included some Comanche terms, my informant was reminded of a few words that were used only with children.

In trying to verify this list and add to it, I talked to some women of various ages, all of whom were native Sahaptin speakers, and found that they were also unaware of the presence of such words in their lexicon. They were even more embarrassed to talk about them than the old man had been.

I went down the list of 30 items in Ferguson (1964) with my informants, but was able to elicit only the following short, and undoubtedly incomplete, list.

pápa	'food' What the child says when he wants to eat and also used by adults as a general word for food in baby talk.
mɔm	'mother' Sometimes ʔm. Standard Sahaptin words 'mother' are pčá or ɬla.
dada	'father' Standard Sahaptin words are pšit or tu'ta. (My informants did not think these two forms were borrowed from English, but they nevertheless may be.)
hum	'go to toilet' This is a standard Sahaptin word meaning 'unpleasant smell' but it is used for this purpose even in English-speaking Yakima Indian homes. The child uses it to indicate need, or parents ask, "You want to hum?"

aw mámak kóšsa	'go to sleep' Mámak is the baby-talk element of this phrase; in standard Sahaptin, aw is 'now' and kóša is 'do it'. Pnuša would be standard for 'go to sleep.'
ɬáɬa	'stop!' Standard verb root for 'stop' is uš̓x̣.
p̓u	'you'll get burned!'
χ̓iθ	'danger!' General term used to startle or frighten baby.

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